

MANSION GLOBAL



Forward-Thinking Furniture

The materials, designs and trends that are changing how we create our living spaces

By Jennifer Tzses

Photography by Paolo Pettrignani; designed by Rome, Italy-based architect and designer Achille Salvagni

Furniture, like art, transcends time and space, becoming even more precious with age. While styles have a way of staying for generations, never really leaving the landscape entirely, every now and then, new innovations take hold whether in materiality, form or function, that shift the paradigm ever so slightly.

“The moving parts within the industry ensure that furniture is ever evolving,” said Ranbir Sidhu, founder and principal designer, Futurezona, a Toronto-based custom furniture company. Fewer barriers to material resources and the influence of technology are forcing designers to rethink traditional ideas to keep up with the demand, he said.

Now, as people are occupying their spaces for longer periods of time, the need for multi-functional pieces is increasing, said Rome, Italy-based architect and designer Achille Salvagni.

“It’s about choosing fewer pieces and those that perform dual functions,” said Lucy Harris, owner of Lucy Harris Studio, an interior design firm in New York. For example, an ottoman that can function as a coffee table with a tray on top in a family room, a credenza that can act as a serving surface as well as a bar.

“We expect to see a demand for more collectible design and art as owners learn to love their homes again—perhaps spending time in previously underused rooms,” Mr. Salvagni said.

And as archetypal rooms are becoming repurposed spaces, furniture design is reflecting this shift.



Changing Functionality

With the need for multi-functional rooms comes new ways to save space. “Space-saving designs have gained popularity, given a number of changing dynamics—housing markets in global centers have shifted to building vertically and people need to be able to do more in less space,” Mr. Sidhu said.

For instance, Mr. Salvagni is currently designing an office in London that doubles as a client meeting room.

“There are numerous little tricks we are using to create hidden drawers with material samples, a hidden screen we can use for presentations and video calls as well as bi-folding doors that can open up the space as an additional gallery if need be,” he said.

Thanks to the emphasis on technological integration, there’s been “a shift in perspective from how we understand our furniture to how our furniture understands us,” Mr. Sidhu said, noting that next-generation technology like artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly responsive to human interaction. “Given technology’s firm vice grip on the future of the design industry, functionality is more important to the consumer than it has ever been.”

Mr. Salvagni is seeing an increase in commissions requiring his firm to incorporate more technology into designs.

“We are reinterpreting classically designed pieces for contemporary living and incorporating the needs of the client,” he said. This means projects such as designing a side table that can also be used as an occasional stool, fashioning a piece of furniture around a series of objects the clients wish to display, or hiding phone chargers inside furniture, Mr. Salvagni said.

Photography by Paolo Petrinani; designed by Rome, Italy-based architect and designer Achille Salvagni



Photography courtesy of Timothy Oulton, designed by Timothy Oulton, founder and creative director of Timothy Oulton furniture and interiors, based in Hong Kong

Material Movement

Material selection is an important area where designers are innovating, and particularly with sustainable materials.

“There are innumerable benefits to working with recycled materials and finding sustainable solutions to manufacturing,” Mr. Sidhu said. An example of this is Karta-Pack, which is a post-consumer material made from the cotton fibers found in clothing like jeans and shirts. “It’s commonly manufactured because of its highly customizable features and strength,” he said.

Karta-Pack is being used to create molded furniture designs that feel like fabric but are solid enough to sustain the weight of a person.

Designer Timothy Oulton, founder and creative director of Timothy Oulton furniture and interiors based in Hong Kong, gravitates toward leather for its timeless nature but is manipulating it in new ways. For what he calls a buff burnished finish, Mr. Oulton gently burns the leather and then buffs it by hand using lamb’s wool on the finished piece.

“It’s the perfect blend of classic vintage style with a rich, burnished finish,” he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Oulton has been working with ancient rocks and crystals.

“Our new Frozen lighting and mirror range is made from natural calcite crystals. The calcite emits a very soft, gentle glow when illuminated and has this almost mystical romance about it,” he said.



Photography by Marco Ricca; designed by Gabriela Gargano, founder of Grisoro Designs in New York City

While Gabriela Gargano, founder of Grisoro Designs in New York City, prefers to focus on classic, natural materials (wools, linens, stone, metals), she’s also been impressed with a newer generation of synthetics.

“Most notably, the progress in nylon rugs has been remarkable,” she said. “Some of our highest-quality vendors have been able to develop options that feel luxurious and are incredibly durable. The pile, look and feel have come a long way; it’s a great alternative that is both kid- and pet-friendly,” Ms. Gargano said.

And then there are innovative uses of legacy materials. Mr. Sidhu works with a kind of barbed sheet metal to enhance his furniture designs by eliminating traditional notions of connectivity (i.e. glue, welding, bolting), while strengthening the physical bond between sheets.

“Materials like grip metal demonstrate an often-unexplored rift between the obligation of the design world to enhance visual appeal and the responsibility of manufacturing to focus on structural integrity. Somewhere deep in that rift is a gold mine that seamlessly communicates with both parties,” Mr. Sidhu said.



The New Shape of Things

Photography by Philippe Klot; designed by Rome, Italy-based architect and designer Achille Salvagni

With a focus on sustainability and more people making the conscious decision to be eco-friendly, organic shapes and natural materials, such as French polish finish on cabinetry instead of lacquer, are coming into play, Mr. Salvagni said.

“These stand the test of time and don’t require obscure, energy heavy processes to create.”

As designers have the opportunity to dissect what is in front of them rather than just viewing it as a whole, new shapes and designs are becoming apparent, Mr. Sidhu said.

“For example, floral designs and patterns have been around since the dawn of time, but a flower can be broken down into all of its different parts, and those parts all have different geometric properties that are beneficial in different areas of design,” Mr. Sidhu said. “It all depends how the onlooker breaks down what is in front of them.”

In terms of silhouettes, structured pieces are giving way to organic forms. For example, Mr. Oulton has designed a line of plush, amorphous sofas and chairs that reflect the comfort and relaxed energy of everyday living. One of his chairs, dubbed Pudgie, is covered in full leather hides rather than pieces sewn together, so very few seams are visible. “The eye is drawn to the natural richness and beauty of the leather without interruption, and it feels incredibly luxurious due to the sheer expanse of leather,” he said.



Photography by Ranbir Sidhu/Futurezona; designed by Ranbir Sidhu, founder and principal designer, Futurezona, a Toronto-based custom furniture company

Basics Re-Interpreted

There is a real renaissance in the use of what we refer to as noble materials: bronze, marble, parchment, onyx, gold, rare woods and lacquers, Mr. Salvagni said.

“This is enabling the revival of nearly lost crafts, which is important from a heritage perspective, so we don’t lose the knowledge of how to work with and get the best out of these materials,” he said. “These skills have taken hundreds of years to hone and if we are not careful, they can be lost within a generation or two.”

Though Mr. Salvagni is returning to more noble materials, he’s also looking at innovative ways to use them for unexpected details, which often means using the off cuts from one piece to create a flourish on another. “This straightforward approach seems simple, but you would be amazed at how many producers simply discard anything they don’t perceive value in.”

Plaster is also making its way back into interiors, Ms. Gargano noted. Whether it’s plaster walls, plaster furnishings or plaster lighting, it really seems to be having a moment. “We love the handmade, textured finish and the dimensionality it adds to a space, even without color,” she said.

Photography by Paolo Petrignani; designed by Rome, Italy-based architect and designer Achille Salvagni



Investing in Bespoke Crafts

Perceptions of furniture are changing as people are choosing to invest in quality pieces made by craftsmen who dedicate their lives to artisanal production at a greater rate, Mr. Salvagni said. He believes this is because consumers are more eco-sensitive and want to buy well and buy once.

And, there's a preciousness in the piece itself—as well as in the relationship a purchaser has with the artist and studio through the commissioning process. “There's value in the works, and collectors like the idea of a whole secondary market open to collectible design to support their investment,” Mr. Salvagni said.



Photography by Maris Mezulis; designed by Rome, Italy-based architect and designer Achille Salvagni

Platforms such as Instagram make it possible for these boutique furniture makers and artisans to connect with designers and clients more easily than ever, and they've been receiving a lot of well-deserved attention, Ms. Gargano said. “Our clients are excited to work with these vendors on custom pieces and appreciate the skill and creativity that goes into making something that is truly handcrafted.”